

Are You Living The Abundant Life?

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*"I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly." —
John 10:10*

It is a common misconception among non-Christians that the Christian life is, frankly, boring. Christians of every stripe the world over are thought to be dull, humorless, austere people. For instance, Southern Baptists are ridiculed by the media because they preach against drinking, dancing, playing cards, and—how out of touch of them—premarital sex. When they inaugurated a boycott of Disney World for its annual Gay Day a few years ago, the media's coverage could not have done more to reinforce the world's image of intolerant, rigid, square, biblical Christians!

The cause is not advanced in the least by the stuck-in-time lifestyles of the Amish and related denominations. Dressed in their centuries-out-of-style clothing and forbidding the use of most modern devices, such people scream "archaic" and "austere" to the world. Most people, even other Christians, despite their tolerance for their beliefs, consider them crazy to adhere so inflexibly to a way of life half a millennium removed from the present!

Modern mainline Protestants have tried to shed this uncool image. In many churches, a contemporary service has replaced or been added to the traditional service. This modern, pop-culture service features live, upbeat music (read "Christian rock"), heavy use of pictures and computer graphics flashed on huge screens, and short sermons given by high-energy youth pastors, and the mostly young attendees wear casual clothes ranging from blue jeans and T-shirts to khakis and polo shirts. This change in format has been a conscious choice aimed at ridding Christianity of its dreary reputation among the "unchurched."

Even so, if the world considers unrestrained hedonism the norm in terms of "fun" and "living large," biblical Christianity will indeed be considered lackluster and unyielding by comparison. The Bible is clear in its calls for Christians to cease behaving as most in the world do:

[A Christian] no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles—when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries. In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you. (I Peter 4:2-4)

Yet, just because a Christian exercises self-control does not mean his life is boring, underprivileged, and unrewarding. In fact, lived properly, a Christian life is ultimately more exciting, successful, and satisfying than most human beings can imagine! Certainly, the lives of Christians are full of responsibility and self-restraint, but the rewards and blessings that accrue over a lifetime of pleasing God and living His way of life simply overwhelm the seemingly onerous duties and strictures. There is no comparison!

Most people are not aware that this is a primary reason Christ came as a man to this earth—to teach us how to live abundant, fulfilled lives. Notice His plain statement in John 10:10: "I have come that

they [His sheep, Christians] may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly." According to the very Founder of Christianity, His disciples, if they follow His teachings, will live enviable, full lives! They will have lives worth living!

But, specifically, what does He mean by "life . . . more abundantly"?

Delineating *Abundant* and *Life*

A problem arises when discussing this concept due to the apparent subjectivity of the term "abundant." What is abundant living for one person may be absolutely unsatisfying for another. A hard-charging, A-type businessman—into exotic vacations, sports cars, and rock climbing—would not consider a rocking chair on the porch, a vegetable garden out back, and a weekly round of golf at the local course to be fulfilling, yet they would probably suit a retired senior citizen just fine. One person's bowl of cherries is another's bowl of cherry pits.

The Greek word Jesus uses in John 10:10 to describe the kind of life He came to teach His disciples is *perissón*, meaning "superabundant," "superfluous," "overflowing," "over and above a certain quantity," "a quantity so abundant as to be considerably more than what one would expect or anticipate." In short, He promises us a life far better than we could ever envision, reminiscent of I Corinthians 2:9, "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him" (see Isaiah 64:4). Paul informs us that God "is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20).

However, before we begin to have visions of palatial homes, classic automobiles, around-the-world trips, and wads of pocket money, we need to step back and consider what *God* says comprises "life." Once we determine His view of living, we will have a better grasp of what kind of blessings we can expect as Christ's disciples. All we need to do is glance around at our and our brethren's situations to know that wealth, prestige, position, and power in this world are not high-priority items on God's list of blessings (I Corinthians 1:26-29). In terms of economic, academic, and social strata, most of us come from the lower and middle classes, and we tend to remain in a situation similar to the one in which we were called (compare I Corinthians 7:20-24).

Perhaps the most telling biblical definition of *life*—particularly *eternal life*—is uttered by Jesus Himself in John 17:3: "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." Note that this definition makes no mention of length of days, health, prosperity, family, occupation—in fact, the only thing it does mention is knowing God!

What can we take from this?

» God is not overly concerned with the physical circumstances of our lives. It is enough that He assures us that we need not worry about what we will eat or wear (Matthew 6:25-32; Philippians 4:19).

» Eternal life, the kind of life in which a Christian is truly interested, is not determined by duration but by a relationship with God. This is why, once we are converted and impregnated with the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are said to have eternal life already (I John 5:11-13), though not, of course, in its fullness.

» Eternal life—the life God offers us through Jesus Christ and His teaching—is thus about *quality*, not quantity. Put another way, the abundant life is life as God lives it (Ezekiel 33:10-11; I Peter 2:21; I John 2:6), for once we truly come to know God, we will desire to emulate Him.

» Physical blessings, then, may or may not be byproducts of God's way of life; neither our wealth nor our poverty is a sure indication of our standing with God. Certainly, God desires that we "prosper in all things and be in health" (III John 2), but the bottom line is "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth" (verse 4), not that we live like royalty.

» Finally, a Christian's life revolves around, as Peter puts it, "grow[ing] in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (II Peter 3:18). This suggests that the abundant life is a process of learning, practicing, and maturing, as well as failing, recovering, adjusting, enduring, and overcoming because, in our present state, "we see in a mirror, dimly" (I Corinthians 13:12).

As humans, we are naturally oriented toward material things, but as Christians, our perspective must change. Paul admonishes, "Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died [in baptism], and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:2-3). To us, life—and our perception of abundant life—is a whole new ballgame!

Promises, Promises

But what about God's promises of physical blessings?

Most successful televangelists preach what is called "the Prosperity Gospel." Using select Scriptures, they teach that if one gives his life to Jesus, and if he follows certain biblical principles, God is obligated to fulfill His promises of wealth, health, and well-being. In the end, God becomes little more than a genie-in-a-bottle, granting wishes out of sheer compulsion. To these preachers, this is the abundant life God promises, and hundreds of thousands of people agree with them.

It is true that the Bible is full of promises. It is also true that Jesus tells us several times in John 14-16, "If you ask anything in My name, I will do it" (John 14:14; see also 14:13; 15:7, 16; 16:23-24, 26). Psalm 37:4 pledges, "Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart." These sound like absolute promises, and if God is to be true to His Word, He must fulfill them, right?

This is what the televangelists have concluded, but in the end, it is a facile conclusion. Very few of God's promises in the Bible are absolute in nature; they are, instead, *conditional* promises, governed not only by our responses to God, fulfilling certain requirements, but also by the perfect judgment of God. As James 1:17 says, He gives only good and perfect gifts; He will never give one of His children a "blessing" that would ultimately derail His purpose for him or that would be too much for him to handle.

It works similarly among mere mortals. A human parent would not send his son to vocational school if he really wanted him to be a doctor, even though tuition to the vocational school would be a "good thing." Likewise, the same parent would not entrust his child with thousands of dollars in cash at

Toys 'R Us, despite the fact that such sums of money would be considered a wonderful gift. If human parents have enough wisdom to give goal- and maturity-dependent gifts to their children, how much more does God (Romans 11:33)?

The faithful Abraham and Sarah are good examples of this aspect of God's promises. In Genesis 12:2, God tells Abraham, age 75 at the time (verse 4), that He would make of him "a great nation," implying that he would have children. God makes this promise again in verse 7: "The Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'To your descendants I will give this land.'" Yet, He does not give Abraham the promised child when he is 76 or 78 or 80!

After his rescue of Lot from the confederation of kings, Abraham pleads with God in Genesis 15:2-3—he is now 80 years old—for an heir. God repeats the promise, and Abraham believes Him (verses 4-6), yet Sarah does not become pregnant any time soon. Later, after Ishmael is born of Hagar when Abraham is 86 years old (Genesis 16:16), the patriarch wonders if this is the promised seed, but when the boy is thirteen—Abraham is now 99!—God reiterates, "No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son" (Genesis 17:19).

Finally,

. . . the Lord visited Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken. For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him. . . . Now Abraham was one hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. (Genesis 21:1-2, 5)

Evidently, a great deal had to happen in the lives of Abraham and Sarah—predominantly in terms of spiritual maturity—before God felt the right time had come to give them their promised baby boy. *Twenty-five years* passed before God fulfilled His promise. Notice that Scripture itself informs us that God performed the miracle to allow Sarah to conceive "at the set time." There was one perfect time for this promise to be fulfilled, and God fulfilled it when all the conditions were right.

And we can thank Him profusely for doing the same for us (II Corinthians 4:15).

Shining the Light on Our Lives

Despite our humble, modest circumstances, are we living abundant lives? Despite our lack of toys, a mansion on the lake, or a Rolls-Royce on our driveway, are our lives better than we ever expected? Or do we feel that life has passed us by, serving us the dregs instead of the wine? If so, could it be that we need a change of perspective?

J. Paul Getty, at the time perhaps the richest man in the world, said, "I hate and regret the failure of my marriages. I would gladly give all my millions for just one lasting marital success." He possessed the money to live whatever lifestyle gave him the most satisfaction, but at the end of his life, he came to realize that a good, enduring marriage meant more to him than riches. He died feeling like a failure at what life is really all about.

King Solomon lived a similar life of wealth, power, and privilege. The book of Ecclesiastes chronicles his lifelong experimentation with various lifestyles, projects, possessions, hobbies, and creature comforts. What does he ultimately conclude about how humanity should live?

Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, before the difficult days come. . . . Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether it is good or whether it is evil. (Ecclesiastes 12:1, 13-14)

His conclusion is totally compatible with Jesus' statement in John 10:10. Jesus did not come promising us wealth, prestige, and authority on earth (although He does promise us these things in the world to come), but He came with good news from His Father about how to attain eternal life (John 6:40). Like Solomon's, His message is very clear, ". . . if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments" (Matthew 19:17).

The big "secret" is that the abundant life is contained in the keeping of God's commandments, in tandem with the grace supplied through Jesus Christ. John writes, "And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:16-17, ESV). Jesus came to give man the means by which he could properly keep God's commandments; His grace puts commandment-keeping in its proper place. Once a person is living this way—what Paul calls "walk[ing] in the Spirit" (Galatians 5:16-25)—his life is naturally going to be abundant because he is no longer under the penalties and curses that breaking the law exacts (see verse 18). His life will be pleasing to God, and He will bless him, now and in the life to come (Psalm 19:11; Proverbs 11:18; Matthew 6:33; Revelation 11:18; 22:12)!

Are our lives abundant? Are we reaping the rewards of following God's way of life? Have we begun to enjoy the benefits of keeping God's commandments?

Every Sabbath, we enjoy the benefits of keeping it holy (Exodus 20:8-11), including physical rest, time with our families, fellowship with our brethren, and communion with and instruction from God. It may not be "exciting," but it is living as He wants us to live.

The same is true of keeping the other commandments. If we have happy families and marriages, we are reaping the benefits of keeping the fifth and seventh commandments (verses 12, 14). If people find us trustworthy and honest, we are being rewarded for keeping the eighth and ninth commandments (verses 15-16). If we are content in our circumstances, our peace of mind derives from practicing the tenth commandment (verse 17).

Moreover, if we see spiritual growth taking place, and if we are producing good fruit in our lives, we are experiencing the results of a strengthening relationship with God, encapsulated in the first four commandments (verses 2-11; Matthew 22:37-38). Such a relationship with our Creator is *the key* to abundant living, for there is no greater, more satisfying accomplishment than that among men!

When we reach this point, we will have learned the godly perspective, and we will know that the life of God we live is definitely abundant living—no matter what our circumstance (Philippians 4:11)!